Migrants Between Worlds: Inclusion, Identity and Australian Intercountry Adoption

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Abstract

When migrant issues of identity, citizenship and marginalization are considered, research has traditionally focused on those who have arrived as adults or as complete family groups. While there has been considerable research on child migration to Australia, intercountry adoption remains a small yet significant area of research. However, past adoption research has usually considered intercountry adoptees through the paradigm of adoptees facing challenges of identity and family integration, rather than as migrants in their own right. As migrants, intercountry adoptees usually consist of children from non-European, non-English speaking backgrounds living with English speaking European Australian families. This provides such migrants with both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, they are raised as part of the dominant cultural group and share this privileged status and identity, having access to cultural capital and social benefits that derive from membership of this group. On the negative side, they have the physical attributes of the outsiders/others, can be perceived by those who do not know them as outsiders/others, and often have limited opportunity to share in their birth culture. Repositioning intercountry adoptees as migrants rather than adoptees provides new opportunities to address the challenges faced by them, their families and their Australian host society.

Keywords

Ethnicity, hybrid identity, inter-country adoption, migrant community, multicultural, social and cultural capital, white privilege.

MIGRANTS BETWEEN WORLDS: INCLUSION, IDENTITY AND AUSTRALIAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

The research on migrant issues of identity, citizenship and marginalisation has naturally been dominated by studies on those who arrived as adults or as complete family groups. Research has also explored child migration to Australia, but intercountry adoption remains an area on the margins despite the growing significance of this community whose members were born in countries that range from Vietnam to South Korea, and from China to Ethiopia. There are multiple dimensions to intercountry adoption research, but the dominant perspectives represent it as part of the adoption realm rather than as a form of migration, and intercountry adoptees are not usually represented as an immigrant community in their own right. Intercountry adoptees are undeniably adoptees as the conventional discourse claims, but their multiple identities need to be acknowledged. They must be examined from a migrant-centric framework and as a migrant community, and studies of migrants in Australia should be inclusive of intercountry adoptees. Intercountry adoptees are child migrants, rather than just being adoptees with different physical characteristics to be observed through an adoption centric paradigm. Once they are re-presented as migrants, new opportunities for exciting hybrid identities become apparent.

The intercountry adoption community is characterised by their small numbers, and their division into discrete national based groups. In 2009 it is probable that intercountry adoptees in Australia numbered around 8,200 individuals, most aged under 40. The numbers entering Australia in any given year fluctuate, with arrivals over the past decade usually being in the high 300s, and with 349 arriving in Australia in 2008-2009 (AICAN 2010).[1] Although this is a small community within the Australian population, the community itself becomes considerably larger when the total number of adoptees, their adoptive families[2] both nuclear and extended, and their partners and children are included. When debating

[1] Unless otherwise stated, statistics are taken from the Australian intercountry adoption network database <http://www.aican.org/statistics.php>.

[2] The term adoption triangle represents the three interests of adoption, these being the birth parents, the adopted child and the adoptive parents. This simplistic image ignores extended family, group interests, social attitudes, and the dynamics of the process (Marshall and McDonald 2001). Adoptees have multiple 'real' parents (Pavao 2005:1) but in this paper the term parent will refer to adoptive parent unless birth parent is specified.

whether intercountry adoptees can be legitimately seen as a community in their own right, it might be argued that their primary definition is one of national based groups such as Australian-Chinese adoptees, Australian-Filipino adoptees or Australian-Taiwanese adoptees. They may have such identities, yet they also have multiple identities and are identified as an intercountry adoptee community by government departments. All this indicates that despite their small numbers there is a case for intercountry adoptees to be recognised by researchers as a migrant community in their own right.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA

Internationally, the practice of intercountry adoption began in the 1940s with the arrival of post-war European orphans to the United States of America, and in the 1950s intercountry adoption became transracial after the Korean War.[3] Although the Korean adoption program was initially focused on abandoned children of mixed Korean-American parentage and on war orphans, the program soon focused on ethnic Korean adoptees, and more than 100,000 children settled in the United States in the succeeding sixty years. Intercountry adoption across ethnic and national boundaries developed beyond Korea, and the United States model of intercountry adoption was to be followed by western European states as fertility rates declined in the 1970s.

In the immediate post-war period, intercountry adoption to Australia based on the United States model was impossible because of the racist White Australia Policy. This was an era when both Labor and Liberal parties supported the expulsion of temporary wartime arrivals of non-European descent, and community attitudes were opposed to the migration of non-European or partly European children, regardless of their parentage. This included the small group of Australian-Japanese children living in southern Japan in the late 1950s. While there was sympathy regarding the poor living conditions of these children who had been fathered and abandoned by Australian soldiers stationed in Japan during the Occupation and the Korean War, the official attitude was that it was inappropriate for them to settle in Australia (Elder 2007).

The end of the White Australia policy and the relaxing of racist community attitudes created the conditions to allow non European migration, and thus changed the demographic composition of Australia. However, it needs to be acknowledged that these changes also contributed to the acceptance of the concept of non-European intercountry adoption. The increase in non-European intercountry adoption to Australia is usually associated primarily with the decline in local adoptions but there is also a link between decline in racist attitudes and the liberalising of migration.

Small numbers of Vietnamese war orphans were adopted by Australian families in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and one highly publicised group arrived as the war reached its closing stages. Intercountry adoption was limited before the 1980s, and statistically significant intercountry adoption to Australia began in 1979-80 when 66 children arrived (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001:189). Intercountry adoption increased as local adoptions declined. Several factors were responsible for the decline in local adoptions including more progressive attitudes and support to women choosing to become single mothers, and the increased availability of contraception and abortion (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Family and Human Services 2005:1-4).

Intercountry adoption had stabilised to a rate of slightly less than 400 per year by 2008,[4] and the majority of children coming to Australia were not adopted to known relatives. The

[3] The term transracial is frequently used to distinguish between adoptees and adopters who share the same cultural background and ethnic heritage, and those that do not. For a British account of the baby boomer and Generation Y experiences, see Gill and Jackson (1983).

[4] The Australian intercountry adoption rate is substantially lower than in comparable affluent western democracies. The sometimes problematic adoption system in the United States is publicised in Australia, and references in Australian popular culture frequently emphasise adoptions by celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna. Celebrity adoption is atypical of any intercountry adoption experience. In 2004 United States intercountry adoption reached its highest with 22,900 intercountry adoptions, a peak that declined to 12,700 in 2009, and virtually none of these involved celebrities. Another difference between the Australian and United States experiences is the strong domestic adoption culture of the United States. Despite its high profile in Australia, United States intercountry adoption is relatively low in proportion to population. Affluent democratic European states such as Sweden, Ireland, Spain, Denmark, Italy and Norway have higher rates of intercountry adoption in proportion to their populations than the United States, with the United States falling between them and Australia. The current low rate of intercountry adoption within Australia can be explained by government policies, legacies of injustice and poor practices of the past. For further information see Gehrmann (2005).

overall numbers of intercountry adoptions in Australia is relatively stable, but rates are declining slightly as a proportion of the national population. Children have primarily come from non-European countries, and in the past decade the most significant countries of origin have been China, South Korea, Ethiopia, the Philippines, India, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Columbia.

As migrants, intercountry adoptees are typically children from non-European, non-English speaking backgrounds living with English-speaking European-Australian families. There are exceptions however, as some state jurisdictions place a high priority on would-be adoptive parents with links to the country of origin. Countries of origin such as India and Sri Lanka follow a similar system placing the highest priority on the adoption of children who can be placed with Australian families who share the cultural origins of the child. In the 1960s and 1970s poor adoption practices resulted in negative consequences for some adoptees. The poor practices included low levels of cultural awareness by prospective parents and limited pre-placement education by government departments. This compounded the challenges for some intercountry adoptees who experienced difficulties based on having been adopted into a predominantly Anglo-Australian world where a child with brown skin was a rarity, and where the dominant cultural representation of an Australian did not include them. Armstrong and Slaytor (2001) record accounts of such poor practice, and the cultural isolation and the suffering that eventuated. As intercountry adoption increased, adoption practices were reformed to ensure far greater cultural sensitivity and support for adoptees. At the same time the predominantly Anglo-Australian society of the 1960s and 1970s was also going fundamental changes.

In contrast to adoption practice in previous eras, prospective adoptive parents now undergo extensive pre-adoption education, testing and assessment before they can be considered for adoption. They are educated on the significance of cultural awareness, and part of their assessment examines their knowledge of their prospective child's birth culture. Prospective parents are assessed on their commitment to maintaining cultural links to their child's country of origin, and are encouraged to join local intercountry adoption support groups. While some adoptive parents might eventually reduce their commitment to maintaining cultural heritage and cultural links, many parents passionately embrace those aspects of their child's birth culture that they are able to access. It is impossible for adoptive parents to replicate the upbringing of the birth culture, but they can privilege and value it during the upbringing of their adoptive children.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

When compared to other migrants, intercountry adoptees have access to a very high quantity of Australia-specific social and cultural capital because of their close affinity with the Australian culture of their adoptive parents. Despite their origins in the developing world they inherit the social and cultural capital that is comparable to, and in some instances higher than that of relatively privileged migrants from Anglosphere countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. While having a physical appearance that might lead the white Australian observer to see them as an outsider from Asia or Africa, the intercountry adoptee has had the upbringing, education and affluence that gives them opportunity to select the identity of the insider from middle Australia.

Their culture is that of contemporary multicultural Australia, an Australia that is increasingly influenced by globalising trends. Their own household cultures are multiracial, and this is significantly different from old-style mainstream Australian culture as Australia, like Canada and the United States, has become increasingly multicultural since the 1960s. While on the surface intercountry adoption narrative often appears in the mass media as a story where the affluent whites from the developed world adopt a brown poor child, contemporary Western society is of course far more diverse than the above proposition suggests. To take a Canadian example, adoptive mother Jasmine Akbarali's Pakistani-Finnish biological heritage, and her Japanese Italian French-Canadian aboriginal and Jewish extended family linkages are not so remarkable in a 21st-century adoption story. Such diversity would have been unusual in an adoption story of the 1950s (Akbarali 2008). Indeed, the ethnic diversity of Akbarali's own family background makes the ethnicity of her Chinese-born daughters unexceptional. In an ever more diverse Australia, the proposition that culturally isolated white middle-class adoptive parents might raise an intercountry adoptee in an Anglo Australian monocultural environment is increasingly implausible.

Examination of the background of adopting families indicates that they are likely to possess the liberal, socially progressive educated middle class values that support multiculturalism. Intercountry adoption is a challenging process. The cost of adoption can appear prohibitive, and in Australia the costs

of adoption vary. For example, fees for adoption from the Philippines are currently US$3,500 while adoption fees for Taiwan are US$10,000. These costs exclude government and legal administrative charges within Australia, airfares, and hotel accommodation within the country of adoption. The bureaucratic process of adoption itself can often discourage less affluent or less educated prospective parents who may feel they lack familiarity and skills to negotiate the arcane and complex world of white-collar bureaucracy. Furthermore, authorities in the countries of origin often base their decision to allow international adoption on education and class-based criteria, and on a commitment by the adopting parents to adhere to specified values, such as maintaining the host culture where possible. In some instances this class-based criteria mandates the possession of high levels of secondary education, trade skills or university degrees and having a proven high income. Countries of origin want their children to go to more affluent and culturally literate families, which maximises the resources available to the child, thus increasing the opportunity for the child to have all their needs met.

A comparison can be made between intercountry adoptees and other migrants who lack their extensive host community support networks. On the positive side, intercountry adoptees are raised as part of the dominant cultural group and share this privileged status and identity, having access to social and cultural capital and the benefits that derive from membership of this group. They have the level of social and cultural capital comparable to migrants from the Anglosphere, or middle class non-white professionals. The non-adopted children of other immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds may of course acquire such social and cultural capital, but it is harder for them to acquire this. To some extent intercountry adoptees also share white privilege in defined institutional settings. This is strongest in communities such as schools, work place settings, and small residential communities where intercountry adoptive parents have an established place. As the ethnic composition of the Australian population alters, white privilege may well become less significant, but the assumption of white privilege by technically non-white people presents some interesting avenues for further research.

LINKS WITH THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

There is an obvious attachment between intercountry adoptees and their adoptive families, and the child's country of origin, which can be an emotional link, and can also be something more tangible. In some instances they communicate regularly via email and telephone with members of their extended birth family. For those intercountry adoption programs where older children are adopted to Australia after the loss of their birth parents, it is more likely that there may be continued contact with extended family members. In the case of the intercountry adoption program to Ethiopia there has been some chain migration, in the first instance with the adoption of other siblings through the intercountry adoption program, and it is possible that further chain migration of extended family members may occur in the future. It is a common characteristic of migration that immigrants who are more affluent provide remittances to support those less affluent members who remained behind in the country of origin. The Ethiopian intercountry adoption program has resulted in well-established aid programs, orphanage aid projects, business investment, and a travel company, while individual Australian families send remittances to support their new extended Ethiopian family members, and other members in their child's country of origin.

Intercountry adoptive families are also increasingly likely to have return visits or reunions to their country of origin. Return visits occur for a number of reasons that include the relative affluence of many Australian adoptive families, as well as the deeply embedded value that maintaining links to the country of origin is a critical component of best practice in intercountry adoption. Indeed, in the United States an industry has developed based on return to the country of birth for a visit to re-establish linkages and develop a sense of place. Governments such as Korea actively promote 'motherland' visits. This is not a universal experience for all intercountry adoptees. Due to the punitive nature of the One Child Policy, bureaucratic secrecy and the nature of Chinese values regarding secrecy in adoption, Chinese intercountry adoptees are likely to experience very different association with their birth country (Rojewski & Rojewski 2001).

HYBRIDITY OF THE ADOPTION COMMUNITY

Through the intercountry adoption process, Australian parents and families of intercountry adoptees become members of a hybrid adoption community, a community with a 'transracial' focus. This intercountry adoption community conducts a wide range of activities designed to support the adoptive parents, their extended family, and their adopted children. These activities can include language classes,

cooking and dance classes, intercountry adoption camps, playgroups, and gender specific weekend activities. By developing such linkages and by taking part in these activities new communities are formed. These communities might have an affinity with a particular non-Australian country such as Taiwan or Thailand, but even though these communities might engage in regular interaction with the immigrant communities in Australia who come from Taiwan or Thailand,[5] they are not Taiwanese or Thai. The children have developed a hybridised identity, as children who are physically different from their parents and are culturally different from other immigrants from their birth country. The Australian parents have become hybridised and have adopted a new identity, that of being the parents of children who look different from them. For both sets of group members, there is a highly developed interest in the culture of the children's country or origin. To them this culture is both foreign and yet part of their identity as Australians.

While the parents and extended family of intercountry adoptees have a high affinity with their child's country of origin, in the eyes of nationals of that culture intercountry adoptees are unlikely to ever bridge this gap and become Korean or Columbian, Filipino or Indian. However, for themselves intercountry adoptees have become members of a hybrid community by adoption, and have the options of choosing their own situational ethnic identities. For example an Ethiopian adoptee can be Australian or an Ethiopian-Australian depending on their choice in a given situation. Because of the increasing ethnic diversity of Australia an Ethiopian adoptee can also position themselves within a range of black Australian or brown Australian identities, as an African or as somebody having affinities based on shared sense of identity that links them to indigenous Australians, Pacific Islanders, and African-Americans. These children can be whatever they choose to be.[6]

The pain revealed by intercountry adoptees in the *The Colour of Difference* reaffirms the need to support adoptees and make them aware that they have the right to choose their own identity. Having multiple identities does not need to be problematic, but is something that can enrich and empower.

Generation Y and Generation Z intercountry adoptees in contemporary Australia are raised with a high sense of multicultural awareness, and an openness to multi-ethnic associations. This is developed through intercountry adoption support groups and the establishment of their identity as brown Australians, black Australians, or Asian Australians. This means that they are not just Thai-Australians or Chinese-Australians, but that they have an identity that is associated with their physical appearance in a positive rather than a negative way. Some racist confrontations will inevitably occur, but for an Australian host society that has been subjected to the globalising influences of Oprah Winfrey and the United Colours of Benetton advertisements, an intercountry adoptee's physical appearance is not the liability it once was. International authority figures of the last decade such as Condolezza Rice, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon are just as likely to be brown as white. In a world accustomed to accepting the legitimacy of the hybrid identity of Tiger Woods as an advertising and sporting icon, the daily moralising authority of a televised Oprah Winfrey, and Beyonce or Ice Cube as idols in popular youth culture, exciting new role models appear. These, and the ascent to superpower presidency by a commodified Barack Obama,[7] provide exponentially different role models of non-white success when contrasted to those available to intercountry adoptees who were adopted in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The new group of hybridised intercountry adoptees who are growing up as members of

[5] Close associations are often formed with national immigrant communities to allow for the development of linkages between adopted children and the migrant adults and children from the country of origin. While this is not a problem free process, it is desirable for adopted children to have birth country role models.

[6] Australian cases of individuals with African-American and European Australian biological heritage who had been given or who had assumed an indigenous identity include Roberta Sykes and Mudrooroo. Both individuals experienced racism in a society that discriminated against brown or black skinned indigenous peoples, and had been given an indigenous identity by others that may not have matched their biological identity, but was an identity wholly appropriate to them. For further detail on other African Australians see Pybus (2005).

[7] Obama remains a contested figure, subject to racial and religious slurs. Concerns regarding his representation of his ethnic heritage are not confined to conservative white opponents. When Barack Obama began his presidential campaign his identity as a biracial individual raised by a white mother and Indonesian step father, and by his white grandparents in a nonracist environment became his defining characteristics. His Kenyan biological heritage had contributed significantly to his physical identity in a racially attuned United States, yet his upbringing was far removed from that of black America. His claimed identity as black rather than African-American was controversially challenged by black commentator Debra Dickerson, who argued that his lack of slave heritage excluded him from blackness.

Generation Y and Generation Z in 21st-century Australia are vastly different to their predecessors growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. They are in Hohmi Bhabba's third space and are a transnational and hybrid group, who unlike their predecessors are well-positioned to shape their own identity in a society that on a global and national basis is far more open and far more accepting of the diversity that they embody.

NEGATIVES FOR INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTED MIGRANTS

While intercountry adoptees can enjoy the hybrid identities identified by Gray (2009), the process of intercountry adoption is not easy for all children who experience it, and different experiences can be felt by any one individual at different stages of their own life. Many intercountry adoptees have significant feelings of grief and loss based on both loss of their specific birth family culture, and of loss of a wider ethnic/birth country culture.[8] These feelings are often manifested in the stages of adolescence. Local adoption focuses on the aspect of loss in relation to biological family members and the birth family culture, while intercountry adoption often focuses on the loss of ethnic and birth country culture. These two areas of loss are significantly different, and can be surprisingly complex. For example, ethnic or birth family culture might reflect the national culture of a country such as Ethiopia, but it might also reflect a subnational culture such as that of the Oromo people, Ethiopia's most significant minority. Then again, an individual child might have a biological heritage that reflects a mixture of the ethnic groups that make up the Ethiopian population. So if that child wishes to identify with another culture from their country of origin, should they identify with Oromo culture or should they identify with the majority Amharic national culture? Should the child try and define themselves with the little or local traditions of village culture, or with the great or national traditions of the official culture? Which sort and which type of imagined community should they make their own?

There are many challenges facing intercountry adoptees on a daily basis. In the shopping mall or on the street, non-European intercountry adoptees are potentially the Other, and might appear to observers as outsiders and recent migrants, due to the physical identifiers that the viewer's eyes focus on. However, they are actually well-established migrants with native fluency in Australian English, and mannerisms and a sense of identity drawn from their immersion in mainstream Australian culture. For the intercountry adoptee, there can be daily challenges and questions. Culturally articulate and well meaning individuals can intrusively question an adopted person about their country of birth which may be a place that they remember little or nothing of, or somewhere that they have little desire to relate to. The fascination with other cultures felt by a well-travelled culturally literate middle-class Australian can result in socially insensitive rudeness when questioning of a small child who finds the strange adults' interest in their unremembered country of origin puzzling.

CONCLUSION

The focus of intercountry adoption has long been on adoption at the expense of migration, as intercountry adoption researchers tried to find the solutions to immediate problems formed around an adoption triangle of adoptee, birth family and adoptive family, rather than developing a perspective that addressed the broader picture of the intercountry adoptee as a migrant member of the national society. Intercountry adoption was seen through the prism of the adoption discourse – of unmarried mothers unfairly compelled to surrender their children, of members of a stolen generation, and the associated grief and loss. All of these have their place at differing levels of significance for different intercountry adoptees, but the focus of intercountry adoption research must be broadened to include the migrant paradigm.

The numbers of local adoptions have been declining consistently since the early 1970s, and intercountry adoption has grown. Despite informal government restrictions, numbers are likely to increase to levels consistent with other western democracies as childless Australians seek to complete their families through intercountry adoption. This generational change in the composition of the adoption community as baby boomers age and memories of White Australia fade will allow the contemporary Generation Y and Generation Z intercountry adoption community to transition from their current marginal position in the domestically focused adoption community. This will allow them to adopt a new sense of community as they reposition themselves as both migrants and adoptees. If this can occur, it offers the opportunity to locate more identity choices, and more security.

[8] Many non-adopted migrants experience loss and grief at different stages of life, but intercountry adoptees lack the strong support networks of family who have migrated together.

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